

U.S. Rep. Tom Udall (NM-3)
Statement of Introduction
Valle Vidal Protection Act
9/15/05

Mr. Speaker:

I rise today to introduce the Valle Vidal Protection Act of 2005. The Valle Vidal is located in the heart of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in northern New Mexico and is home to abundant populations of Rocky Mountain wildlife, including the largest heard of elk in our state. This "living valley" is an incredibly important ecological treasure whose value lies in its wilderness and natural beauty, not in its finite supply of energy. The Valle Vidal is also a special place for New Mexicans and people from around the world who come to relax in its alpine majesty and enjoy outdoor recreation and sporting opportunities. Boy Scouts from all over the country have come to the adjacent Philmont Scout Ranch for decades, and each year spend thousands of hours doing conservation work and earning merit badges in the Valle Vidal.

Over the past two years, I have followed closely numerous events concerning the Valle Vidal. I have traveled to the Valle Vidal to witness its beauty, spoken with my constituents and others from the state, tracked political developments, and reviewed regulatory or policy initiatives undertaken by this administration. I have also received thousands of calls, e-mails, faxes, and letters against drilling and practically none in support of it. As a result, I have come to the inescapable conclusion that the Valle Vidal should be protected from oil and gas development.

The modern history of the Valle Vidal dates back to 1841, when Mexican Governor Manuel Armijo granted 1.7 million acres, the largest single landholding in the Western Hemisphere, to Guadalupe Miranda of Taos and a French trapper named Carlos Beaubien. This land grant, which included the 100,000-acre piece that is now known as the Valle Vidal, is probably the most famous ever made by Mexico. It later became known as the Maxwell Land Grant, after Lucien Bonaparte Maxwell, a Kansan who married Beaubien's daughter and later became the sole owner of the vast property.

Thirty years ago, the Pennzoil Co. purchased nearly 500,000 acres of this land, which they used as a hunting park. Pennzoil maintained the area as such until 1982, when it donated a 100,000-acre parcel of it to the federal government, which was at that time the largest donation in Forest Service history. Interestingly, no drilling was ever done in the Valle Vidal when Pennzoil owned it. What an ironic travesty it would be for the government to now turn its back on this unique gift and allow the area to be blighted.

I do not want the Valle Vidal to be opened up for drilling. New Mexicans and thousands of Americans are overwhelmingly against drilling in the refuge. These concerned citizens realize that the Valle Vidal's minimal contribution to our energy needs is not worth despoiling such an important ecological system. The consequences are just too great. Moreover, many of my constituents, as confirmed by recent economic studies, recognize that the protection of special public lands like the Valle Vidal is good for local

economies and that, in fact, exploitation of these places for a few hours of energy will hurt long-term economic growth and sustainability.

Fundamentally, drilling in the Valle Vidal to create more energy is a false choice. We must consider alternative and more effective measures for solving our nation's energy needs. For example, an increased use of renewable fuels and improved fuel efficiency standards would contribute greatly to solving many energy-related problems. The key is to make the best renewable and alternate energy systems competitive with today's non-renewable sources of energy so that they can be developed for use in the United States and even for sale abroad. We simply cannot hope to drill our way to energy independence. The fact that this special place is being targeted for oil and gas leasing radically demonstrates what is wrong with the administration's energy policies.

In this case, the Forest Service's commitment to a Leasing Environmental Impact Statement – before the agency has even prepared a Forest Plan Amendment – demonstrates that legislative action is necessary to ensure that the Valle Vidal's non-mineral resources and values are given the attention and protection they deserve. Moreover, the Forest Service, even with irrefutable reason to do so, is without the legal authority to permanently protect this special place from minerals development. New Mexico is a home to a strong oil and gas industry, which I openly and avidly support. I believe there are many places suitable for oil and gas drilling. The Valle Vidal, however, is not one of them.

To that end, today I am introducing the Valle Vidal Protection Act to permanently protect the Valle Vidal from mineral extraction. In so doing, my legislation does not interfere with the Forest Service's Forest Plan Amendment process. That process is allowing the Forest Service to exercise its expertise and listen to the people and thereby establish a long-term management plan for the Valle Vidal commensurate with its importance as a critical component of our natural and cultural heritage. In my view, which I know is shared by many of my constituents, the Valle Vidal's ecological health and integrity should be restored and protected and enjoyed to the utmost by current and future generations.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues both in the New Mexico delegation as well as in the entire Congress to join me in passing this legislation and protecting the Valle Vidal permanently. This ecosystem is too valuable to the people of New Mexico and the nation, and the energy gains too miniscule to justify the potential damage to this pristine area. We must protect it.

Thank you.